

Statement on Signing a Memorandum on Federal Benefits and Non-Discrimination and Support of Domestic Partners Benefits and Obligations Legislation

June 17, 2009

In 2007, Michael Guest, the first openly gay Ambassador confirmed by the United States Senate, resigned from the Foreign Service. He loved his career, but he had to leave it in the end, because he believed that the country he served was failing to implement the principles of equality it espoused abroad. His partner was ineligible for training provided to ambassadorial spouses; he bore the costs of his partner's transportation to his placements abroad; and his partner did not receive the overseas benefits and allowances given to spouses of Ambassadors.

It is too late to prevent Ambassador Guest from having to make the choice he made, but today I am proud to issue a Presidential memorandum that will go a long way toward achieving equality for many of the hard-working, dedicated, and patriotic LGBT Americans serving in our Federal Government, Americans like Ambassador Guest.

In consultation with Secretary Clinton, who in her role as Secretary of State oversees our Foreign Service employees, and Office of Personnel Management Director John Berry, who oversees human resource management for our civil service employees, my administration has identified a number of areas in which greater equality can be achieved under existing law by extending to the same-sex partners of Federal employees many of the same benefits already available to the spouses of heterosexual Federal employees.

I am therefore requesting the Secretary of State and the Director of the Office of Personnel Management to extend the benefits they have identified to the same-sex partners of Federal employees where doing so can be achieved consistent with Federal law. I am also requesting the heads of all other executive departments and agencies to conduct a review of the benefits they administer to determine which may legally be extended to same-sex partners.

But this Presidential memorandum is just a start. Unfortunately, my administration is not authorized by existing Federal law to provide same-sex couples with the full range of benefits enjoyed by heterosexual married couples. That's why I stand by my long-standing commitment to work with Congress to repeal the so-called Defense of Marriage Act. It's discriminatory, it interferes with States' rights, and it's time we overturned it.

I am also proud to announce my support for an important piece of legislation introduced in both Houses of Congress last month, the domestic partners benefits and obligations act of 2009. This legislation will extend to the same-sex partners of Federal employees the same benefits already enjoyed by the opposite-sex spouses of Federal employees.

The legislation has a number of cosponsors in both Houses of Congress, but among those many sponsors, I want to recognize one in particular, Representative Tammy Baldwin, who has been a real leader on this issue and more broadly on the LGBT struggle for equality. Representative Baldwin, I look forward to working with you to achieve the important objectives set out in this bill as it moves through the legislative process. I also look forward to working with the bill's Senate champions, Senators Lieberman and Collins; I know that they will approach this process with the same spirit of cooperation in pursuit of our shared goals that they bring to all of their work in the Senate.

Extending equal benefits to the same-sex partners of Federal employees is the right thing to do. It is also sound economic policy. Many top employers in the private sector already offer benefits to the same-sex partners of their employees; those companies recognize that offering partner benefits helps them compete for and retain the brightest and most talented employees. The Federal Government is at a disadvantage on that score right now, and change is long overdue.

As Americans, we are all affected when our promises of equality go unfulfilled. Through measures like the Presidential memorandum I am issuing today and the domestic partners benefits and obligations act of 2009, we will advance the principles upon which our Nation was founded and continue to perfect our Union.

NOTE: The statement referred to Alex Nevarez, partner of Michael E. Guest, former U.S. Ambassador to Romania.

Categories: Statements by the President : Federal benefits and non-discrimination.

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